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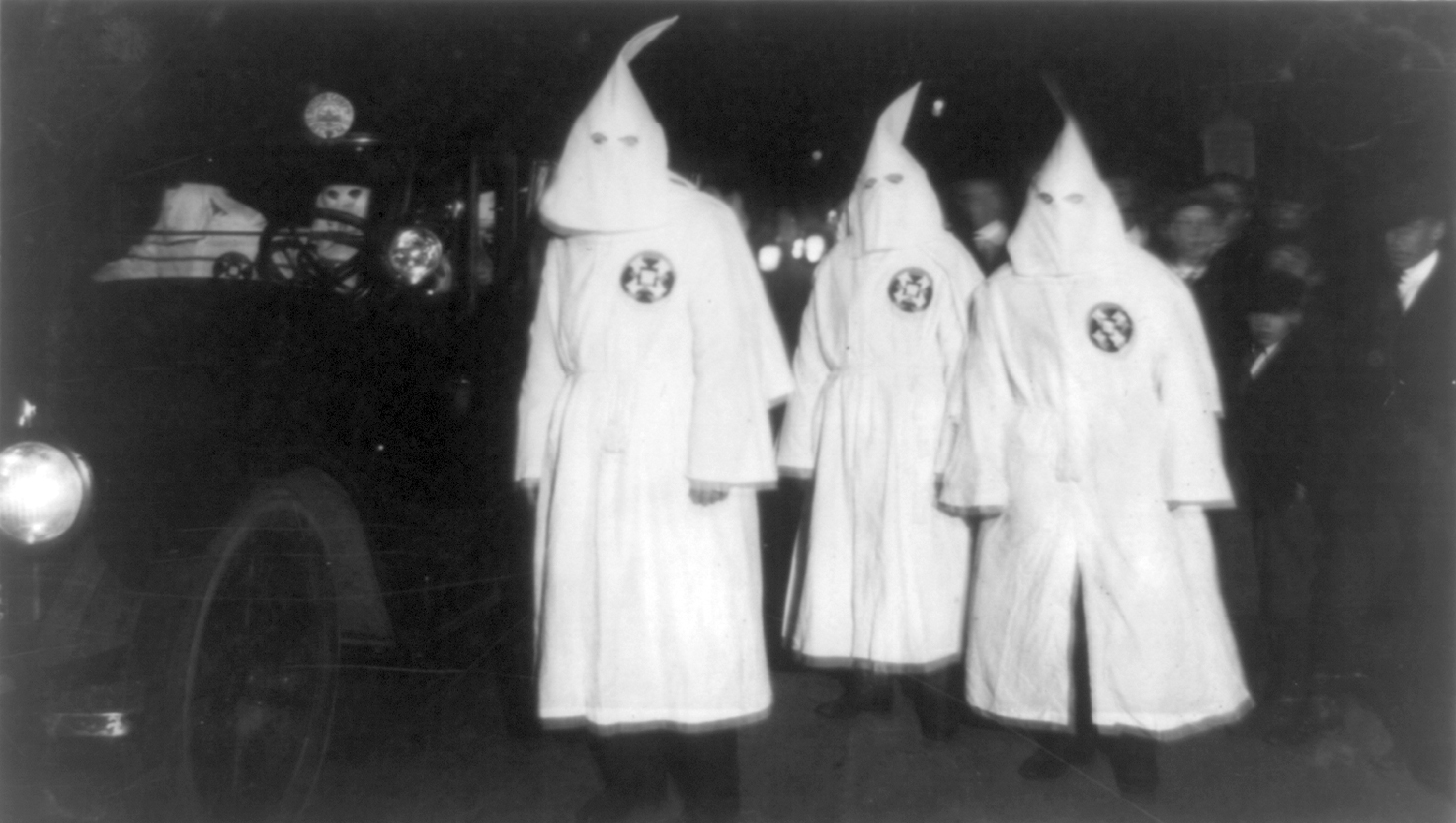
The Great Migration: African-Americans Journey North

Searching for Prosperity and Freedom

The most immediate cause of this migration from the South was the First World War, which shut off the flow of cheap European immigrant labor in 1914. By 1915, with war production in full swing in the United States, the need for industrial workers was severe. Two unexpected and previously unwanted sources were used— white women and black southerners. Recruiting agents representing some northern industries went south to pull African-Americans north. White southerners did not greet the recruiters with open arms, and some were run out of town. The *Chicago Defender*, the most widely read black newspaper in the South, urged southern blacks to come north by publishing letters from newly transplanted blacks saying that life was better in the North, and by writing editorials that praised the North and condemned the South.

Front Page of the *Chicago Defender* after a riot, 1919.

1. **Why do you think white southerners made northern recruiters leave town?**

When the United States entered the war in 1916, the labor shortage became even more severe, and the demand for black workers increased. Work in northern industries paid more than agricultural work. Men could earn up to $2.50 a day in a Chicago meat packinghouse, or as much as $5.00 a day on an assembly line in the auto factories of Detroit. These rates of pay far exceeded anything African-Americans could make in the South. Even black women could make $2.00 a day as a domestic worker in a Northern city — twice as much as they could make doing the same work in the South. Despite the fact that the cost of living in Northern cities was higher than in the South, blacks felt that the higher salaries more than made up for the difference. What intensified the economic pull of the North was the fact that the South had been suffering some terrible growing seasons in the early 1910s, with major crop damage caused by flooding.

**Resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan**

It seemed that the North also offered greater opportunities and more freedom. The North offered fewer Jim Crow restrictions and legalized segregation not so widely enforced. In addition, in the North there were far fewer lynchings, a form of violence in the South that helped whites maintain control through terrorism. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan after the release of the very popular *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 — an epic Civil War film that portrayed the Klan as heroic — intensified the mix of fear, hatred, and violence that spread throughout the South, and gave blacks more reason to leave. Blacks were commonly run off their land in the South through both legal and illegal. They were often robbed of their wages, kept in debt, and denied equal access to a public education despite the fact that they paid taxes at the same rate as whites. They were also more likely to be imprisoned for petty crimes than whites, where, through the convict-lease system, they could be used as an uncompensated labor force.

Members of the Ku Klux Klan

But all of this, by itself, may not have been enough to bring about the level of migration that occurred between 1915 and 1930. After all, there was also terrible racial violence in the North. Indeed, some of the worst racial violence in America occurred in places like St. Louis in 1917 and in Chicago in 1919, industrial cities that African-Americans had migrated to. Blacks were largely restricted to certain sections of these cities where they lived in chronic poverty, overcrowded, unhealthy conditions, and with less access to public services. Although blacks received better health care in the North than in the South, they were still high mortality rates that were far higher than for any other group. So the North was not as appealing for many blacks as some might think, although in some respects it was clearly an improvement.

**A Complex Movement**

But black migration must be understood as a more complex move than simply blacks going from the South to the North. The majority of black people still lived in the South in 1930s. The major pattern was for blacks to move from rural to urban, and so many, during these years, left the countryside for the southern cities. Some, like author Richard Wright, went from Mississippi to Memphis, and then to Chicago; others did not. This pattern of moving from rural to urban was the same as whites, who, from the Progressive Era onward, were leaving the country and agriculture for more urban settings.

Questions:

1. Four reasons why African-Americans started moving north:
2. During this time, it was not just African Americans moving north from the South. There was a major pattern of everyone doing what?